MEDIA – (DIS)INFORMATION – SECURITY

What is a troll factory?

In Internet communication, a troll is defined as a person who provokes disputes, e.g. by raising controversial topics or attacking other participants. However, a troll factory is an entity conducting disinformation propaganda activities on the Internet. This activity is often concealed under an inconspicuous name, e.g. public relations agency, Internet research centre, etc. The operations of troll factories are usually focused on the political or economic sphere. The aim of the operations may be e.g. attacking political opponents, unfairly attacking a competing company or other action indicated by the ordering party. Troll factories achieve their goals using, among other things, fake news and hate speech.

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The origins

The term "troll factory" started to emerge on a wider scale in media reports in 2015. At that time, journalists revealed the existence in St. Petersburg of a troll factory employing 300 people. The entity officially operated as the Internet Research Agency, managed by an oligarch, Yevgeny Prigozhin. The duties of the employees included publishing on the Internet, mainly in social media, posts praising Russian President Vladimir Putin, and criticizing countries not supporting Russia. The operation of this troll factory was initially associated with the annexation of Crimea and then with the presidential election in the United States.

How do troll factories operate?

Employees of troll factories create fake identities and run their profiles in social media. It is important to create an impression of the authenticity of the created account, therefore, not only the content related to the purpose of the troll factory is published here, but also materials making a fictional profile credible, such as those concerning private life. The profiles feature images taken from ready-made Internet repositories, modified to deceive Internet search engines. Since the troll factory employs hundreds of people and each employee has several accounts, it is easy to create a social network linking fake profiles and creates the impression of a real one. The longer the given accounts are maintained, the easier it is to create the illusion of reality. People employed in troll factories often work in shifts to ensure that the messages they produce can be displayed on a 24-hour basis.

What do troll factories produce?

Products of troll factories include, among others:

- fake social media profiles;
- entire websites are created to support trolling operations;
- posts published in social media as well as on websites, blogs etc.

Troll factory employees not only create messages, but they also respond to comments and take part in online discussions. They can also simulate disputes in order to increase the impression of the reality of fake profiles through which they disseminate the content that they create.

Professional and amateur trolling

Troll factories take action in a planned manner, in accordance with the recommendations of the ordering party, who pays for posting specific types of messages and comments on the Internet. The activities of internet trolls are paid for and controlled by top-down guidelines. The content they create reaches "volunteers" who continue their propaganda and disinformation operations of their own free will, without any compensation, because the messages distributed by troll factories are in line with their political views, supported ideology, etc.

Internet trolling and bots

The above-mentioned operations of Internet trolls are supported by bots, i.e. programs sending out messages automatically, e.g. in response to the appearance of a keyword. However, while the messages sent by the bots demonstrate a low degree of reliability and are easy to be classified as spam (language errors, duplication of messages), the material distributed by troll factories may appear more reliable, and therefore their disinformation activities will be more effective.

Preventing Internet trolling

The major media corporations such as Facebook, Google and Twitter have joined the battle against the operation of troll factories. The basic activity of these entities consists in removing fake accounts. Twitter and Facebook, for example, have blocked in this way a campaign supported by the Chinese authorities conducting propaganda operations concerning the protests in Hong Kong in 2019. The occurrence of Internet trolling is on a massive scale, as evidenced by the fact that Twitter deleted 2,000,000 fake accounts in 2018 alone.

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